Historical Overview and Interpretive Themes

Historical Overview

Between 1803 and 1848 the United States acquired more than two million square miles of new territory in the trans-Mississippi West. These lands tripled the size of the country and offered people the opportunity to expand and settle in areas west of the Mississippi River.

Most Americans had only vague impressions of conditions beyond the Mississippi River. Although the region included the homes of thousands of American Indians, some early explorers had dismissed much of this vast area as uninhabitable desert. Despite its forbidding character, fur trappers, traders, and missionaries established an American presence in the West soon after the turn of the 19th century. American trappers, following in the wake of the Lewis and Clark expedition, ranged from the Missouri River to beyond the Sierra Nevada. In the 1820s, New England sea captains established contact with the peoples of California to trade American manufactured goods for cattle hides, beef tallow, and other items. Traders followed the overland trail to Santa Fe and Chihuahua, helping to establish a southwestern trade network with Hispanic merchants and American Indian groups. Christian missionaries also ventured west to create communities.

Beginning in the 1830s, both Americans and Europeans traveled westward by the thousands. These emigrants used and opened numerous trails and built ferries, bridges, forts, towns, and cities. Within a few decades, areas that once had been either unknown or dismissed as barriers to civilization joined the rest of the nation as states or territories.

CULTURAL CONTACT AND CLASHES ON THE OVERLAND TRAILS

American Indians played a key role in the overland migration. Although some of the emigrant trails were new, many mirrored earlier Indian routes that resulted from following major river systems and crossing imposing mountain ranges (see map 12). Initially, American Indians assisted and guided explorers and emigrants.

The legends of the overland trek included spectacular tales of bloody battles between emigrant trains and the "savages" who inhabited the western plains and mountains. In fact, violence was almost nonexistent in the early 1840s. The occasional contacts between emigrants and Indians were usually a novelty for both sides. Members of several tribes proved invaluable to many overland travelers by providing supplies and fresh livestock, operating ferries at dangerous river crossings, or serving as guides. Emigrants entrusted their stock, wagons, belongings, and even their families to Indian swimmers and boatmen at dangerous river crossings all along the trail.

Theft, not violence, was the Indian threat that early overlanders most often cited. The usually heavily armed emigrants were as likely to kill or maim themselves or other travelers in accidental shootings, quarrels in camp, or disputes at fords and ferries than die in battles with Indians.

However, as the decade progressed and the number of travelers further increased, conflict and violent confrontations escalated. The thousands of emigrants strained the resources of the trails corridor. Many made a nuisance of themselves, wantonly destroying the game that represented the Indians' livelihood. The racism that profoundly shaped antebellum society also framed emigrant-Indian relations. Numerous emigrants expressed little sympathy for the rights of an "inferior" race to land they perceived as virtually empty and under used. Americans who considered the West part of the United States resented Indian attempts to levy tribute for passage across tribal lands. Many emigrants paid, occasionally grudgingly; others ignored Indian demands for payment or reacted violently. Indian warriors occasionally retaliated by harassing wagon trains and robbing and terrorizing isolated emigrants. As relations deteriorated, Indians from many tribes killed hundreds of overlanders, either for offenses the emigrants had committed or in retribution for the crimes of others. Whites killed hundreds of Indians, often for no other reason than that they were Indian. The increasing spiral of violence between emigrants and Indians ultimately pitted the tribes against the government of the United States. The overland migrations helped initiate a series of wars that lasted for decades and robbed Indians of their political and economic independence for decades to come.

OREGON AND CALIFORNIA TRAILS

The Oregon country, which included the present states of Oregon, Washington, and Idaho, a large portion of British Columbia, northwestern Montana, and a portion of Wyoming, provided great opportunities for emigrants and would-be settlers. Reports of the richness of the Oregon country, and particularly of the Willamette River Valley, triggered a movement that by the late 1840s became one of the great mass migrations in history.

The United States economy provided additional motivation for a society already inclined toward mobility. In the aftermath of the Panic of 1837, disillusioned farmers throughout the Middle West and the Mississippi Valley began to consider moving west to recoup their for-

tunes. The first emigrant wagon train bound for the Pacific Coast, the Bidwell-Bartleson party, left Independence, Missouri, in the spring of 1841. Soon, thousands of eager Americans followed.

Despite economic hardships back home, many emigrants would never have made the overland trek had they understood the dangers that awaited them. The trip to Oregon or California entailed a five to six month journey by wagon across almost 2,000 miles of open plains, forbidding deserts, and rugged mountains. With few supply stations of any kind, emigrants had to be nearly self-sufficient. Supplies for the entire trip often could not exceed the capacity of one wagon and a few yokes of oxen.

Timing was critical in preparing for the journey. Travelers could not start before the prairie grass was ready for grazing, but had to begin early enough to beat the first heavy snows in the Sierra Nevada. The first emigrants had to find and hire reliable guides. Traveling alone invited disaster, but finding compatible trail companions was often difficult.

Weather on the plains was unpredictable; emigrants encountered dust storms, thunderstorms, floods, snow, wind, and blistering heat. Emigrants forded numerous streams swollen by spring runoffs. Finding sufficient fuel and potable water was a taxing chore. Dried buffalo dung frequently offered the only alternative for fuel, and occasionally the paunch of a dead animal provided the only water supply. Some pioneers confronted brutal violence and even cannibalism. Cholera outbreaks in the late 1840s and early 1850s killed emigrants by the thousands.

With the discovery of gold in 1848, migration patterns changed. Emigrants bound for Oregon and those already settled in Oregon began to emigrate to California. Two years later California gained statehood and attracted an increasing number of emigrants who opened numerous routes across the Sierra Nevada in their efforts to reach the gold fields of California. By 1850 those moving to California greatly exceeded those headed for Oregon. They followed the Oregon Trail through Wyoming and then blazed new routes across Utah, Nevada, and California.

While most travelers jumped off from points along the Missouri River, hundreds of Cherokees and other southerners followed trails across Arkansas and Kansas to the Santa Fe Trail. They traveled along the Arkansas River into what is now Colorado. Turning northward, the overlanders used trading trails along the front range of the Rocky Mountains to join finally with the main California Trail in Wyoming.

While the journey to Oregon was difficult, the trek to California often was even more demanding. California-bound emigrants encountered the worst of the Great Basin deserts, where they endured brutal hardships. Oxen died by the hundreds and desperate travelers jettisoned prized possessions hoping to reach California. Beyond the Rocky Mountains and the Great Basin, the emigrants confronted the rugged Sierra Nevada Mountains spanning western Nevada and eastern California. The emigrants bound for California explored various routes to cross the Sierra Nevada. Many of the first attempts ended in near disaster. Some emigrants staggered over the last leg of their journey with their few remaining belongings strapped to pack animals. Failure to follow the right route and reach the Sierra Nevada before the snow fell could prove catastrophic, as the ill-fated Donner party and others discovered.

MORMON PIONEER TRAIL

Other emigrants went west searching for a sanctuary from religious intolerance and violence. The strife that shaped much of ante-bellum religious life resulted in part from the 1820s revival movement known as the Second Great Awakening. The movement swept through the frontier regions along the Appalachians, creating new religious denominations and utopian societies. One of the most important groups that emerged from this area was the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, founded by the charismatic Joseph Smith.

The Latter-day Saints, or Mormons, attracted converts by the thousands. The new church provoked in non-Mormon "gentiles" suspicion and hostility equal to the Saints' religious fervor. The Latter-day Saints moved from New York to Ohio to Missouri to Illinois in order to escape persecution. After Smith's murder in Carthage, Illinois, in 1844, the Mormons under Smith's protégé, Brigham Young, planned an exodus into the far West. But three years passed before they finally completed their trek and reached their destination in the Valley of the Great Salt Lake.

The Mormon trek to the Valley of the Great Salt Lake comprised one of the most remarkable chapters of the overland migrations. Their search for freedom from religious persecution set them apart from most American emigrants. However, they also displayed a strong spirit of enterprise. Unlike other Americans, who usually traveled overland in small groups, the Mormons maintained a communal structure both on the trip west and in their new colony at Salt Lake City.

The organization and discipline of the Mormons served them well in their migration and in their rapid development of an agrarian community. By late 1848, Salt Lake City had become a supply station for travelers on the California Trail. Other Mormons moved east along the trail as missionaries to build bridges, operate ferries, and sell supplies to emigrants. Still others turned a profit salvaging equipment that westbound travelers had cast aside. Economic necessity led many Mormons and non-Mormons to subordinate earlier antagonisms and cooperate. Unfortunately, violence continued to color Mormon-gentile relations. Many Mormons harbored resentment for the treatment they had received in the East. Some held particular enmity for the residents of Missouri. In 1857 a party of Arkansas overlanders passed through Salt Lake City en route to the gold fields. Motivated by political and economic concerns, relations grew strained and radical Mormons and their Indian allies retaliated by executing almost 120 members of this party in what became known as the Mountain Meadows massacre.

The church enjoyed enormous success in attracting converts from Europe. These new church members immigrated to America to make the trek to Utah. In 1856 Brigham Young decided that these newcomers would join with new American converts and make the overland crossing using handcarts instead of wagons. Between 1856 and 1860, 10 companies of almost 3,000 people crossed the Great Plains pushing or pulling handcarts loaded with as much as 500 pounds of supplies. For the most part, the handcart experiment was successful. Handcart emigrants traveled faster and easier than those using wagons. However, two handcart companies made a late start from the Missouri River, and the results were disastrous. Snowstorms trapped these companies in the open country between Bessemer Bend and South Pass, Wyoming. Here, over 220 emigrants died of exposure before relief columns arrived from Salt Lake City.

In little more than a decade, the Mormons built a thriving city and colony in the Valley of the Great Salt Lake. Utah, its population having grown to over 30,000, became a U.S. territory in 1856, with Brigham Young serving as territorial governor. When Young publicly sanctioned polygamy as church doctrine in 1852, the Latter-day Saints found themselves locked in an increasingly bitter conflict with the U.S. government. Polygamy helped trigger this conflict, as did Young's near-absolute rule of the territory. The dispute erupted in a short-lived conflict between the Mormon colony and the United States. Young, the Mormon church, and the colony all survived; and Utah continued to flourish as one of the country's most remarkable social and religious experiments.

PONY EXPRESS TRAIL

By 1860 the population in the West had grown dramatically. As gold and silver were discovered in Colorado, Nevada, and other places in the West, migration patterns changed to allow access to the new mining areas. Better communication between the eastern states and the far West became a pressing issue. The federal government responded by issuing mail contracts to overland and seagoing carriers. The best land routes, however, required at least three weeks travel time; water routes required as much as six months. Many western citizens found this level of service unacceptable. Some prominent Californians, including Senator William Gwin, contemplated the creation of a mounted courier service to carry mail between the Missouri River and the Pacific Coast. The idea presented some significant obstacles that required the federal government to provide carriers with substantial financial incentives.

In 1849 the U.S. government began the first regular overland mail service by private mail carrier to the western United States from Independence, Missouri. During the following decade, the federal government provided freight or stagecoach lines with generous incentives to accept western mail contracts. Russell, Majors, and Waddell was a western Missouri freighting company that had been under contract with the federal government to transport supplies to army installations throughout the West.

By the late 1850s, the firm of Russell, Majors, and Waddell was on the verge of bankruptcy due to heavy losses. The partners, particularly the recklessly enterprising William H. Russell, eagerly sought some way to recoup the company's fortunes. According to Russell, an opportunity presented itself in the winter of 1859 while in Washington, D.C. when he encountered Senator Gwin. Gwin tried to sell Russell on the idea of a pony express. The senator supposedly promised that if Russell and his partners created the courier service, he would work in Congress to secure for the firm the necessary subsidies. A speculator by nature, and desperate in the bargain, Russell pitched the idea to his partners, Alexander Majors and William Waddell. Russell overcame his partners' misgivings, and the firm announced the creation of the Central Overland California and Pike's Peak Express Company, more commonly known as the Pony Express, to provide mail service between the Missouri River and the Pacific Coast.

The courier service could never sustain itself solely on the revenues from carrying mail. Yet, if it succeeded in transporting mail throughout the year, it could lead to the award of a lucrative contract for conventional mail carriage between Missouri and California. The tens of thousands lost in the Pony Express would be more than made up by the hundreds of thousands made in the bigger deals to follow.

In many ways, the Pony Express embodied the essence of capitalism in a frontier setting. It also illustrated the essential role of the federal government in western development. The firm of Russell, Majors, and Waddell faced enormous startup costs to get the courier service underway. The Pony Express required hundreds of horses and hundreds of men to work as riders, station keepers, or stock handlers. In addition, most of the stations in the far West were not self-supporting. The company had to ship supplies over great distances, which added enormously to the firm's overhead. In spite of all obstacles, the new firm managed to begin service within a few months of its formation. On April 3, 1860, the first riders departed St. Joseph, Missouri, and San Francisco, California. They and other riders transported the mail pouches, known as mochilas, to the eastern and western terminuses of the route within hours of the 10-day period that Russell and his partners had promised.

The new courier service functioned remarkably well, maintaining consistent service over an enormous distance in the face of difficult terrain and frequently harsh climatic conditions. The Pony Express's early achievements bolstered the company's claims that the central overland route was a practical route for year-round communication. Continued success would strengthen the firm's case for a conventional mail contract. In the meantime, however, it became readily apparent that without a substantial government subsidy, the Pony Express would quickly collapse. The Pony Express continued in operation until November 1861, when it discontinued service partially as a result of the completion of the overland telegraph line, which eliminated the need for mounted couriers, but also because the anticipated mail contracts never materialized.

The Pony Express earned a significant place in American history. It created a new and faster communication link between the East and the Pacific Coast. It demonstrated the viability of the central overland route; much of the route that its riders followed became the right of way for the transcontinental railroad and later highways. The Pony Express played an important role in maintaining communication between the federal government and California in the months immediately before the start of the Civil War. Finally, it has come to symbolize America's rapid expansion to the Pacific rim in the antebellum era. Through this process, the United States secured its conquest of the American West.

This short-lived venture has captured the imagination of the American people. The persistence of its image in American history reveals a great deal about how we see ourselves as a nation.

Interpretive Themes and Subthemes

The following interpretive themes have been identified for the Oregon, California, Mormon Pioneer, and Pony Express National Historic Trails. These themes and subthemes provide the framework and guidance for interpreting the four trails in an integrated and systematic way.

TRAILWIDE THEMES

- The geographically central corridor of these four historic trails (up the Platte, the North Platte, and the Sweetwater Rivers to South Pass) has been called "the best natural road in the world." This corridor became the "superhighway" of westward expansion during the mid-19th century, a period of "manifest destiny" when the nation realized its dream of stretching from ocean to ocean.

- This corridor had been used for thousands of years by American Indians and in the mid-19th century became the transportation route for successive waves of European trappers, missionaries, soldiers, teamsters, stagecoach drivers, Pony Express riders, and overland emigrants bound for opportunity in the Oregon territory, the Great Basin, and the California gold fields.

- Though overland traffic declined dramatically after the completion of the transcontinental railroad in 1869, the trail corridors laid the basis for communication and transportation systems that are still in use today. Railroads, modern highways, pipelines, and power lines still follow the general routes of the old emigrant trails.

- Landforms, landmarks, forage, wood, and water dictated the paths of migration. Numerous factors, such as weather, flooding rivers, adequate pasture for draft animals, and water for animals and humans affected the organization and outfitting of wagon trains and the Pony Express.

- The influx of close to 500,000 emigrants (from 1840–60) across and into the traditional homelands of the American Indians undermined their political and economic independence in the trans-Mississippi West.

- The emigrants' fear of American Indians was often unjustified. Many emigrants would have faced more difficulties and challenges had it not been for American Indian assistance along the trails.

- All 19th century overland travelers shared similar experiences while traveling west: the drudgery of walking hundreds of miles, suffocating dust, violent thunderstorms, mud, temperature extremes, bad weather, poor forage, fear of Indians, accidents, sickness, and death. These experiences — frequently recorded in journals, diaries, and letters — became a part of our national heritage and inspired a romantic movement in art, literature, and cinema that has had an enormous effect on American popular culture

GEOGRAPHIC REGIONS AND SUBTHEMES

The Missouri and Mississippi Rivers (Starting Points)

The outfitting and organization of the overland emigrant trains occurred mainly in towns and communities along these rivers.

- Independence, Westport, St. Joseph, Nebraska City, and Council Bluffs/Omaha were the primary jumping-off points for emigrants headed west; the overland migrations had an enormous influence on the evolution of these towns.

- Often described as a rope with frayed ends, the various routes from the Mississippi and Missouri Rivers jumping-off places (i.e., strands of the rope) converged on the Platte River at Fort Kearny to create the "Platte River Road," the main emigrant, military, and communications route west.

The Platte River

- Fort Kearny marked the end of the tall grass prairies and the start of the Great Plains. The flat, treeless horizon stretching endlessly before them shocked many emigrants, perhaps causing them for the first time to realize the enormity of the task ahead.

  The Platte and North Platte Rivers across Nebraska and Wyoming provided a broad natural avenue, made to order for ox and mule drawn covered wagons. This corridor headed west in exactly the right direction and provided all the necessities for overland travel — water, forage, and a level easy road to follow.

- In the western reaches of the Great Plains, west of Fort Laramie, the country begins to break up into deepening ravines and steeper ascents. Traveling continually in the shadow of Laramie Peak — the emigrants' first view of the Rocky Mountains — and knowing the trail would soon become more difficult, the emigrants began to lighten the loads in their wagons as much as they dared.

The Rocky Mountains and the Continental Divide

- At Casper, Wyoming, the character of the trail changes dramatically and begins the gradual ascent over the high range country toward South Pass and the Continental Divide. Quitting the North Platte River for good, the emigrants became more aware that their trek was a race against the approach of winter and pushed on as rapidly as they could across this "hells reach" of bad campsites, bad water, scarce grass, alkali flats, and rocky, steep terrain.

- South Pass was the key to the entire emigrant trail corridor, for only at South Pass could wagons be taken up its broad, gentle grade and over the 7,550 foot backbone of the Rocky Mountains. South Pass marked the emigrants arrival at the frontier of the Oregon Territory, the end of the long ascent over the Continental Divide, and the half way point of the journey to the West Coast.

- At the Parting of the Ways, emigrants began a series of hard decisions regarding the risks of taking shortcuts. The decision to risk a cutoff — based upon water sources; the condition of livestock, people, supplies, and equipment; the time of year; grass conditions; and their final destination — sometimes meant a life or death gamble.

Snake River-Columbia Plateau and the Pacific Northwest

- In southern Idaho, emigrants encountered scorching deserts, treacherous rivers, exotic landforms, and mineral hot springs.

- In southern Idaho, at the Raft River Crossing, the main branch of the California Trail split from the Oregon Trail. Emigrants were forced to make their final choice of destination, the left fork branching southwest toward California and the right fork continuing west to Oregon.

- At waystations across southern Idaho — such as the Smith Trading Post, Fort Hall, and Fort Boise — travelers were able to reprovision for the last leg of their journey.

- Before the Barlow Road around the south shoulder of Mt. Hood was opened in 1846, emigrants faced the daunting challenge of rafting the treacherous Columbia River.

The Great Basin

- This forbidding landscape became the graveyard of the California Trail — graves, dead stock, shattered wagons, and jettisoned freight bore mute testimony to the basin's unforgiving character. The unrelenting desert sun of late summer beat down on roads enveloped in clouds of alkali dust so thick drivers could not see their lead cattle. With half-starved oxen and people reaching the point of exhaustion, the emigrants felt an increasing sense of urgency to reach their final destination before exhausting their last reserves.

- The Humboldt is a small river-— crooked, shallow, turbid, monotonous, and seemingly endless — but it offered a lifeline of life giving water and grass, which the emigrants followed for 300 miles across the Nevada desert to the Humboldt Sink. Without it, the overland migration to California might have been impossible.

The Sierra Nevada

- These mountains form the Great Wall: the final barrier that stood between the pioneers and a new life in California. By sheer force of courage and determination, this once impenetrable wall of granite was crossed and California was opened to overland emigration.

- The fate of the Donner-Reed party offers horrifying evidence of the price the journey could extract from those who miscalculated their arrival at the gates of the Sierra Nevada Mountains.

- The western ends of the "frayed rope" that began on the Missouri River fanned out from the Humboldt Sink along many routes to various destinations in the gold fields of the Sierra Nevada. In 1849 alone, 25,000 emigrants poured into California along the California Trail, illustrating the vast potential of the new El Dorado on the Pacific Coast.

The Cascades

- The Applegate Trail was developed by Oregon pioneers as a southern route, or "backdoor," to Oregon and a way of avoiding the treacherous descent of the Columbia River.

- When news of the gold strikes in the Sierras reached Oregon, eager forty-niners poured south down the Applegate Trail into the gold fields of the Sierras.

TRAIL-SPECIFIC SUBTHEMES

Oregon National Historic Trail

- The Oregon Trail was the harbinger of America's westward expansion and the core of the largest and longest mass migration in U.S. history.
- In 1836 when Presbyterian missionaries Marcus Whitman and Henry Spalding took their wives over the Oregon Trail to establish Indian missions in the Oregon country, they proved the feasibility of moving families and wheeled vehicles across an area previously perceived as impassable.
- The waves of migration to Oregon strengthened U.S. claims to the Pacific Northwest. By 1846, when the treaty with Great Britain established the northern boundary of the United States at the 49th parallel, more than 5,000 emigrants had settled in the fertile Willamette Valley.

California National Historic Trail

- Between 1841 and 1860, more than 200,000 Americans traversed the California Trail to escape economic adversity, obtain better farmlands, or get rick quick in the gold rush.
- Although most of the overland emigrants to Oregon and California through 1848 sought to establish farms and permanent homes, a majority of the forty-niners were single young men, hoping to make their fortunes in the gold fields of the Sierra Nevada Mountains and return home to the East.
- The California Trail emigrants represented various cultures, ethnic groups, religious denominations, educational backgrounds, and economic interests.
- The rapid influx of Americans along the California Trail influenced national politics, international relations and boundaries, and U.S. policy toward American Indians. Settlement was so rapid that California became a state in 1850 without having been a territory — the only western state to do so.

Mormon Pioneer National Historic Trail

- The migrating Mormons were bound together by a common faith and a desire for religions freedom in the face of intolerance and persecution. This was a movement of an entire people, an entire religion, and an entire culture driven by religious fervor and determination.
- Unlike other elements of the westward expansion, the cohesive Mormon companies showed clear lines of authority and a sense of community.
- The Mormons did not hire professional guides. Instead, they followed existing trails, used maps and accounts of early explorers, and gathered information from travelers and frontiersmen they met along the way.
- Through the construction of bridges, ferries, and supply stations, the Mormons improved conditions and communications along the trail for travelers moving both east and west.
- The Mormon community funded continued migration of poor church members and converts from Europe. About half of all Mormon emigrants came directly from foreign countries.

Pony Express National Historic Trail

- The Pony Express offered the fastest transcontinental mail service of its day, providing a vital, all-season communication link between East and West during a critical period in American history.
- The organization and implementation of this complex system required the contributions of hundreds of people — among them district superintendents, clerks, station keepers, stock tenders, and riders — a stark contrast to the popular image of the solitary express rider.
- The route of the Pony Express had to reconcile requirements for favorable topography and water sources with the need to minimize distance.
- With the completion of the transcontinental telegraph, the Pony Express discontinued operations after only 19 months in service. Yet the trail proved the feasibility of a central overland transportation route and played a vital role in aligning California with the Union just before the Civil War.